



apuntes

Reflexiones teológicas desde el contexto Hispano-Latino

From the Ends of the Earth:
Mission at our Doorstep

Justo L. González

Welcoming the Stranger

Justo L. González

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Apuntes

Theological Reflections from the Hispanic-Latino Context

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From the Editor

Remembrance is an essential element in the narratives that make up the Christian traditions. The gospels begin with an act of remembrance, describing the genealogy of Jesus or providing details regarding his upbringing and/or his ministry. Similarly, the narratives in the Old Testament insist on the remembrance of God's faithfulness and promises. Furthermore, the history of the diverse Christian traditions all point to the historical developments of doctrine and theology, respectively. One would seem to think that our holy texts and traditions point us to the continuous task of asking: "where do we come from?"—With the purpose of answering the question: "Where are we going?" In this time of racial and ethnic ambivalence, religious disputes at a global scale, and the growing anxiety and fear of the other—"where do we come from?"—Might be a question worth asking and exploring.

The two articles presented in this issue of *Apuntes* attempt to locate the reader with this task in mind. Dr. Justo L. González brings to light the historical acts of remembrance that have been produced when Christian churches find themselves in tumultuous moments. Both articles come from lectures/writings that belong to the Biblioteca Digital del Centro Justo González, which is part of AETH. We are grateful for the opportunity and delighted to publish these in this issue of *Apuntes*.

In the first article, González identifies how the Christian churches moved from having one center to becoming an institution of many centers. The North Atlantic centers are no longer the sole proprietors of theological endeavors, but now Lima, Seoul, and São Paulo, have become centers of their own, sending missionaries abroad, including to the United States. González points out that this is radical shift that reminds us that theology has not belonged to one demographic, but has been global and poly-centric since its inception. González highlights key biblical periscopes in addition to events in the history of the Christian missionary movement to substantiate his argument. In the second article, González illustrates the conceptions of how popular discourse has understood the word "stranger" and which "strangers" deserve a welcoming. González makes a case that all who belong to an ecclesial body of Christians are strangers in and of themselves. González challenges us to act upon this virtue, noting that in order to welcome a stranger, one must remember that we are strangers as well. Playing with the semantics of meaning, González encourages and challenges Christian ministries and churches to become more hospitable and to redefine our Christian identity.

It is my hope that as we read these articles, as we embrace this act of remembrance, we will be able to begin to find tentative answers to the question: "Where are we going?"

From the Ends of the Earth: Mission at our Doorstep¹

Justo L. González
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Resumen

En este artículo se explora los cambios que han tenido lugar en las últimas décadas en el cuadro mundial de la Iglesia Cristiana y lo que implican para cada uno de nosotros. El mapa del cristianismo ha cambiado radicalmente, como ya ha sucedido muchas veces antes; pero esta vez el cambio es más radical, pues en lugar de un cambio de centro lo que ha sucedido es una Iglesia policéntrica. En tal Iglesia, ya no se puede hablar de un centro y una periferia, sino de una misión global en la que todos participan. Para los antiguos centros de misión, como los Estados Unidos, esto quiere decir que tenemos que entender que ya no somos sólo centro de misión, sino también tierra de misión. Lo que es más, esta misión entre nosotros no será solamente nuestra, sino de toda la Iglesia global, que vendrá a nosotros anunciándonos el mensaje de nuevas maneras. Para mostrar el trasfondo de esto se dan varios ejemplos bíblicos.

Keywords: *world christianity, church demographics, missionary movements, history of polycentricity*

“Toto, I have a feeling this isn’t Kansas anymore!” With those now famous words young Dorothy expressed her surprise at having been carried away from her quiet, traditional life, into a world that she could not have imagined even in her wildest dreams—a world of good and evil witches, of munchkins and wizards, of a cowardly lion and a sensitive scarecrow.

We may not have felt the cyclone. But in the last fifty years the world has changed in ways as astonishing as any young Dorothy had to face. My father used to tell us about one of his most memorable adventures when he was a young boy, and the family decided to go spend a few weeks at the beach. It took them a whole day to load an oxcart,

¹This lecture belongs to the Biblioteca Digital del Centro Justo González de la Asociación para la Educación Hispana AETH (www.aeth.org).

and another whole day to get there—to a beach that was scarcely ten miles away! I can hardly imagine what he would have said if I told him that today you can buy an item in Manila with no more than a magnetic strip, and have it charged immediately to your bank account in Grand Rapids. I was living in San Juan exactly fifty years ago when I finished the manuscript for one of my first books, to be published in Buenos Aires, and it took me several weeks to find a reliable courier to take the manuscript to Argentina. Today, all I have to do is click “send,” and the manuscript is there! I may not even have noted the cyclone, but certainly, this isn’t Kansas anymore.

Just as the rest of society, the church too has been carried away by the invisible yet universal cyclone of the last decades. When I first went to seminary, in Cuba in 1954, every single one of our textbooks was either in English or translated from English. Today, it is quite common for seminarians in the United States and in England to use books originally written in Spanish. Back then, the center of the church was in the North Atlantic. Theology was produced in the North Atlantic and translated into the languages of the south—Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Swahili. From the same center missionaries flowed southward.

Today, that is no longer the case. Theology is being written in Manila, in Lima and in Seoul, and translated into English, French, and German. Missionaries are flowing from the South and the East to the North and the West. Today Puerto Rico alone sends more missionaries to New York than all the mission boards based in New York send to the entire world. Today there are more Pentecostals in Latin America than in the United States and Europe. As Philip Jenkins has stated, the typical Christian today is “a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian

favela.”² Certainly, the center is no longer in the North Atlantic.

This may be surprising and disturbing for many who grew up in the North Atlantic, hearing that the “white man’s burden,” or the “manifest destiny” of their land and culture was to enlighten the rest of the world with the light of the gospel. On the basis of that task, they raised money, they sent missionaries, they organized churches. How are they to cope now with a new world and a new church whose center they no longer are? “Toto, this isn’t Kansas anymore!” In order to respond adequately to this new situation, it is important to realize at least six things:

The first is that the new situation is not a sign of the failure of missions, but rather of their success. Decades ago, missionaries felt that their task was to plant and develop churches that would be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. This goal has been achieved in most of the lands that were the recipients of Protestant missionary work fifty years ago. This is a story of the great success of the missionary enterprise. Even in lands where Christian mission was closely connected with colonialism, and where colonialism is now dismantled and bitterly rejected, the church continues to flourish and to expand. Those missionaries must have done something right! The reason why it is so important to understand this is that to insist that the missionary calling today is the same as fifty years ago, and that what we should be doing is to continue sending and supporting missionaries just as we used to do then, is to deny the obvious success of those earlier missionaries and to deprive them of their glory.

The second thing that we need to realize if we are to respond adequately to the new situation is that in a way this is not entirely new.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 2.

The center of Christianity has shifted repeatedly through the centuries. Even as we read the book of Acts we see the center of mission shifting from Jerusalem to Antioch. By the third century, the center had shifted again, and was now the entire Mediterranean basin. Six centuries later, it had shifted once more, and was now an axis running north to south, from the British Isles, through the Carolingian Empire, and down to Italy. In the sixteenth century, that previous center was replaced by the Iberian Peninsula, with the Portuguese sailing south and east around Africa, and on to India, Ceylon, Japan, and eventually the Philippines, and the Spanish sailing westward to the Western Hemisphere, and from there even further west, until they met and clashed with the Portuguese in the Philippines. Then came the nineteenth century, and the center became an east-west line running from Western Europe to North-America. This was the center I still knew when I was growing up.

So, although we may be surprised, and some perhaps even devastated, that this center no longer holds, the truth is that such shifts have taken place repeatedly in the past, and should neither surprise us nor make us lose heart.

Thirdly, we need to acknowledge that there is indeed something radically new. What is happening in our day is not just that the center is shifting, but also that new centers are arising in various parts of the world. This, and the remaining vitality of the old center, means that what we have witnessed in our generation is not just a shift in the center, but its breakup into many centers, so that today Christianity, as never before, is polycentric. Korea and Brazil have become centers sending missionaries throughout the world. People from Europe and the United States travel to study theology in Manila, in Lima, in Johannesburg, and in Buenos Aires. Theological books written in San Juan and Johannesburg become

textbooks throughout the world. The Catholic Church in Europe imports priests from Sub-Saharan Africa to work in Ireland, and it even imports a pope from Argentina! The great theological libraries in Tübingen, Oxford, Cambridge and New Haven still possess treasures to which the entire theological world must turn. Mission boards and missionary societies in Germany support churches in Namibia, and churches in Mexico support missions to the United States and Australia. In brief, we are witnessing the birth of a truly polycentric church—and therefore a church that can claim catholicity as never before.

In the fourth place, this entire situation means that we can no longer speak of nations that have been missionized and nations that have not. As I was growing up, I often saw world maps depicting the “advance” of Christian missions. Generally, the West appeared in one color, indicating that these were Christian lands, and the rest of the world in other colors, indicating that they were not. Part of the world was “Christendom,” and our task was to expand Christendom so it would cover the world. I remember as a child looking at a Sherwin Williams poster, “Sherwin Williams covers the world,” and wondering if Sherwin Williams was more successful than Christian mission.

Today it is clear that there is no such a thing as Christendom. There are lands whose cultures have been more profoundly influenced by Christianity, and others where any such influence is less clear. But the world can no longer be divided between what is part of Christendom and what is not, nor can mission be divided between sending and receiving countries. Bringing it home, this means that the United States is now a mission field just as much as China or Angola.

In the fifth place, we need to understand that the changes that have taken place in that world map are not just something that has happened

“out there,” in some distant land that we used to consider a missionary field. It is not only that we are no longer the center, but also that what we used to consider the periphery has now come to the center. The dismantling of colonial empires, and the crisis of economic neocolonialism, have resulted in vast population movements from the lands of the colonized to the lands of the colonizers. Angolans and Mozambicans flock to Portugal, Algerians and Malagasy to France, Nigerians and Indians to Great Britain, and Latin Americans to the United States.

This is true not only of the population at large, but also of the churches and denominations. In the United States, the main source of growth for the Roman Catholic Church is immigration from Latin America, to the point that now more than half of all Catholics in the United States are Latinos and Latinas. The membership decline of many of the so-called mainline denominations would be much worse were it not for immigrants who come to engross the ranks of such denominations: Koreans and Brazilians for Reformed churches, Koreans and Latinos for Methodists, Salvadorans for Lutherans, and so forth.

While many of these people have joined such denominations after migrating to the United States, many others were already part of those traditions in their own homelands, and are thus bringing to the United States a new way of being Catholic, or Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Methodist. Quite often, while these various denominations welcome their numbers, they do not welcome their way of being Catholic, or Methodist, or whatever.

And yet, no matter whether willingly or not, all these various ecclesiastical traditions are being reinterpreted, renewed, and revitalized by the presence of relatively recent newcomers.

Which leads us to the sixth, and probably most important point:

mission is not—or should not be—a one-way enterprise. It is not just a matter of Christians telling, giving, teaching, and others hearing, receiving, learning. When Christians tell, they must also hear; when they give, they must also receive; when they teach, they must also learn. Otherwise, mission runs the risk of becoming just another form of imperialism under the guise of faith.

We have a clear example of this in Acts 10 and 11. The story is well known, and need not be repeated here. It is usually called “the conversion of Cornelius.” But when you look at it more closely, it is clear that what is told here is the story of the conversion not only of Cornelius and his kin, but also of Peter and eventually of the church in Jerusalem. In the story, Peter has no idea what his vision means. When he meets Cornelius he rather ungraciously says: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean”—in other words, if God would allow it, that is precisely what I would call you! Then he sees things that lead him to baptize the pagan Centurion and his family, to discover that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not only for people like him, and even to stay at the home of this man whom he would formerly have called unclean. But that is not all. When they hear what Peter has done, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem call him to account for his actions. How could you have done such a horrible thing? And then, after Peter tells them the entire story, they discover: “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!” In other words, it is not just Cornelius who is converted, but also Peter and the entire church that discover in the gospel dimensions that were always there, but they had not known until the mission to Caesarea made them patently clear.

In its best moments, mission leads not only to the conversion of the non-believer, but also to the conversion of the church. So much so, that one could even claim that the history of the missionary enterprise is also a history of the many conversions of the church.

Although we often forget it, this dimension of mission is included in the Great Commission, that great passage in Matthew 28 that has long inspired the missionary spirit.

If we were to ask in our congregation, what does the Great Commission say?, there would probably be several who would quote it word by word: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” We can quote these lines, which we take to be the reason for our involvement in mission.

But if you read the words more carefully, you will discover that it is not so. These words are not the ultimate reason for mission. As we usually quote it, the Great Commission begins with the words “Go therefore.” This is an odd way to begin a sentence. If someone were to say to you “therefore, go and buy a quart of milk,” your immediate reaction would be: What?! One does not begin a speech with “therefore.” “Therefore” implies an antecedent, a reason for what follows. The words, “therefore, go and buy a quart of milk,” require an antecedent, a reason such as “We have no milk for tomorrow morning, therefore, go and buy it.” The reason for buying the milk is that we are out of milk. The reason for what follows the “therefore” is what is said before it: “We have no milk for tomorrow morning.”

So, when we hear the Great Commission, and it seems to begin with the words “Go therefore,” we should immediately understand that

the reason for what we are being told is not what follows, but rather what precedes the “therefore.”

What appears before the “therefore” is “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” We are commanded to go because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. We are not commanded to go and make Jesus Lord. Jesus is already Lord. We are not commanded to go to distant places on earth to take Jesus there. Jesus is already there. We go to take the knowledge of Jesus. We go to make disciples for Jesus. We go to baptize. But we do not go to take Jesus there, nor to make him Lord there.

When we stop to think about it, this is the reason why mission is always a two-way affair. It is not simply that we have to listen in order to be able to communicate with people. It is also that we have to listen because the Lord whom we announce is already Lord over there, because we have gone there to meet him, and because in order to meet him we have to learn what he has been doing there long before our arrival. Mission is a two-way affair because as we speak of Jesus, Jesus is also speaking to us, giving us signs of his lordship.

We are reluctant to see this, and that is the reason why we begin the Great Commission with the awkward words, “Go therefore.” We are reluctant because even while we proclaim that Jesus is Lord we wish to be in control. We like to imagine that Jesus needs us. We even sing, in words that became quite popular in the early twentieth century:

Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today. He has no feet but our feet to lead men in the way.

No! Jesus does not need our feet to take him anywhere, nor our hands to do what he wishes to be done, nor our lips to sing his praise. As he himself indicated, were we to be silent, the stones would still proclaim

his name.

We are reluctant to see this because we would rather build our own empires than serve a strange kingdom in which the last shall be first, and those who are high and haughty will be brought down.

When Charlemagne set out to convert the Saxons, and thus to bring them into his empire, he was convinced that he was bringing Christ to his pagan neighbors. When the crusaders set out to reconquer the Holy Land, they were convinced that Jesus rode to battle with them. When the first Christians arrived at the New World, they were able to join their quest for God and glory with their missionary endeavors because they were coming to a heathen land that was badly in need of Jesus. This is the sort of mission that follows from a reading of the Great Commission that ignores what precedes the “therefore.”

But there has also been another sort of mission. In the second century there were those who were convinced that the God who had spoken to the Hebrews through Moses and the prophets had also spoken to the Gentiles through their sages and philosophers. So, they set out to find places where the eternal Word of God, the One through whom all things were made, the One who is the light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world, the One unto whom all power has been given, had been manifested even before the advent of Christianity. They argued that the Greeks knew that all truth comes from the logos, that this logos, this Word of God, is the same one whom they had come to know in Jesus, and that therefore there was in the wisdom of the Gentiles something that could even be dubbed “Christian.”

Granted, there were many dangers in this view, and the church has had to struggle with those dangers throughout its history. But even so, the notion that the Word of God was already present in Greek culture

even before the preaching of Christianity allowed those early Christians to approach that culture with openness and respect, and thus to model an approach to mission that is quite different from the imperialistic mission that stems from the Great Commission without the “therefore.”

That was the model followed in the sixteenth century by Las Casas and other Spanish missionaries who saw and affirmed the good in the native population of the Americas, and therefore sought to curb the abuses that were taking place in the name of religion. This was the model followed by Matteo Ricci in China, where he studied Confucianism, became a sage according to Confucian standards, and published a treatise *On Friendship* in which he tried to show the connection between his own faith and ancient Chinese wisdom.

Such practices, however, often are not well received, for they undercut the use of faith and mission as a justification for conquest and imperialism. Las Casas was given all sorts of honors by the Spanish authorities, mostly in order to keep him quiet, and long after his death was repeatedly maligned by his fellow countrymen as a liar and even a traitor. The mission that Ricci had started in China had a serious setback when there was a dispute among Catholics in China about how best to translate the name of God into Chinese, and the pope decided to intervene—thus earning the comment by the emperor, “Who is that barbarian who thinks he can teach the Chinese how to speak their own language?”

But even so, when missionaries such as Justin in the second century, Las Casas in the sixteenth, and Ricci slightly later, encountered other cultures with the conviction that the God of Jesus Christ had already been at work in them, they too, and their own church, learned something about the meaning of the gospel that they would not have known without such an encounter—much as Peter and the church in Jerusalem learned

much from Peter's encounter with Cornelius. They learned that God had long been active in other cultures and societies. God had been inspiring wisdom to Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato. They learned the God had long established principles of justice and solidarity in the Western Hemisphere, and that there was much in Confucius that should be ascribed to God's action.

And in this again the story of Peter and Cornelius serves us well, for Acts tells us that Cornelius was "a devout man who feared God"—that is, he was what was then called a God-fearer, a Gentile who, while not converting to Judaism, believed in the one God and the moral laws of Israel. Furthermore, his vision came a whole day before Peter's, and was also much clearer—which means that, even before Peter arrived at Caesarea, God had been working in Cornelius, preparing the way for the arrival of Peter. And in this case too, the church in Jerusalem resented and questioned what Peter had done.

Mission is both the announcement of what God has done and is doing in us, and the discovery of what God is doing in others. And in that very discovery God often tells us something we need to know

Back once again to the sixteenth century, while John Calvin was working for the reformation of the church in Geneva, a number of Frenchmen, under the leadership of Nicholas de Villegaignon, attempted to settle on an island near what is now Rio de Janeiro, creating a colony that they called *la France Antartique*—Antarctic France. The colony was to survive economically by exporting brazilwood, a wood used for expensive dyes. Villegaignon had promised freedom of worship to Protestants among the settlers. But things turned out otherwise, and after a few months the Protestant settlers decided to abandon the colony and settle on the mainland, among the Tupinamba Indians. The

Protestant pastor Jean de Léry thus began a mission among these Indians, learning much of their language and their customs. When the Portuguese managed to expel Villegaignon and his settlers, Léry remained among the Tupinamba. In a book that he published in 1578, *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre de Brésil*, de Léry reported some of what he had learned from the Tupinamba, not only in matters of life in Brazil, but also about his own faith. For instance, he tells the following story:

An old man once asked me, "Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood to warm you? Don't you have wood in your country?" I answered that we had plenty, but not of that quality, and that we did not burn it as he supposed, but extracted a dye from it for dyeing, just as they did their cotton cords and their feathers.

The old man immediately replied: "And I suppose you need much of it?" "Yes," I answered, "for in our country there are traders who own more cloth, knives, scissors, mirrors and other goods than you can imagine. One single trader buys all the brazilwood carried back by many ships."

"Ah," said the old man "you are telling me marvels. But this very rich man you are telling me about, does he not die?" "Yes," I said, "he dies like all the rest."

But savages are great debaters and generally pursue any matter to its conclusion. He therefore asked me: "When he dies, what becomes of what he leaves?" "It is for his children if he has them . . . or for his closest brothers and relatives."

"Indeed," continued the old man, who as you can see was no fool, "I now see that you French are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience, as you say when you arrive here, and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children and for those who survive you. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death

the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares.”

And then Léry, as a good Reformed theologian, relates what he has just heard to Scripture, and sees the connection between the witness of this Tupinamba and the Ninevites in the story of Jonah: “Although this tribe may be blind in attributing to nature . . . more than we do to the power of God’s providence, yet it will rise up in judgment against the plunderers who bear the name of Christians.”³

Léry has good reason to relate the story of the Tupinamba wise man with the Ninevites in the book of Jonah, for this is similar to what Jesus did with the story of Jonah. As we all know, Jesus declared that “this wicked generation asks for a sign, yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah”(Lk 11.29).

When we hear these words, we usually understand them in term of the parallelism between the time Jonah spent in the belly of the whale and the time Jesus spent in the grave. This is certainly part of what the Gospel of Matthew does with it. But we forget that, both in Matthew and in Luke there is more to the sign of Jonah than the days in the belly of the whale. The entire passage says:

For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment of the people of this generation and condemn them: for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and yet something greater than Solomon is here. The people of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Lk 11.30-32)

³ Quoted in John Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1978), 16.

Surprisingly, the sign of Jonah is not primarily in Jonah himself, but in the people whom the prophet apparently despised. The sign of Jonah is in the people of Nineveh repenting and calling on the mercy of a God whom they do not know, while the prophet who does know God bemoans that mercy. The sign of Jonah is in the people of Nineveh bringing God's prophet to shame, because he wishes to keep the knowledge of God mercy for himself and his own people.

The sign of Jonah is in the queen of Sheba coming from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, when the king's own sons refuse to follow that wisdom. The sign of Jonah is in the harlots and the publicans going into the Kingdom of God ahead of the holiest of religious leaders. The sign of Jonah points to the One who was rejected as a blasphemer and as a drunkard by the religious leaders of his time, and condemned to death by the political leaders, then rising from the dead and sitting at the right hand of God.

And ever since the sign of Jonah has continued to point to him. The sign of Jonah is in the Ethiopian eunuch who is baptized even though the law of Israel forbids that a eunuch be added to the people of God. The sign of Jonah is manifested again in Caesarea in the conversion of Cornelius, and in Philippi in the conversion of a jailer and a rich merchant woman. The sign of Jonah was manifested in the few who at the Areopagus believed the message of Paul, and in the millions who ever since have received and believed that message—in those millions among whom we stand, who had no claim to call themselves children of Abraham, who were no people, who were strangers and foreigners to the promises made to Abraham, but who now have come near.

And the sign of Jonah is ever present among us today. But it is not directly present in the good, religious people who follow our traditions

and our customs. It is present in this new world that we are unable to understand, but where all authority has been given to Jesus. It is present in the ever more motley crowds coming into our communities, questioning our churches, wondering about the love and mercy of God. Like Jonah, we either see that mercy acting in them, or we do not see it at all, and even come to begrudge it.

We live in a scary world. The old clearly defined communities where we used to find comfort and ease no longer exist. We look around, and we see many different faces. We listen, and we hear many different languages. In many ways, this new world may be as scary to some of us as Nineveh was to Jonah, or the land of Oz was to Dorothy.

But, unlike Dorothy, we cannot simply click our heels and get back to Kansas. We may yearn for past assurances, we may live in perennial nostalgia; but we cannot return to the past.

Like Jonah, we may attempt to flee to Tarshish. We may try to live in closed communities where we try to keep this new world from impinging on our lives. We may try to close our borders to any who are not quite like us—like us in culture, in color, in education, and in social standing. We may even use the church as the last stronghold of the world we knew, under the pretext of doing everything “decently and in order,” or that “our system of government does not allow it,” or that we must defend the Reformed tradition in its pristine purity.

Or, as Jesus invites us to do, we may come to acknowledge that something greater than Solomon is here, and that something greater than Jonah is here. This someone greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon is none other than the One who gave Solomon his wisdom. The One who called Jonah to a mission. The One who showed mercy to the Ninevites. The One who has declared “all authority in heaven and on earth has been

given to me; go therefore . . .” The One in whom we believe and whom we seek to serve. The one who not only sent his disciples “to the end of the world,” but who also brought the Queen of the South “from the ends of the earth.” The One who is served both when his disciples go to the ends of the earth and when those who are not his disciples come from the ends of the earth.

This may be a scary world. This may seem an alien world. It certainly isn't Kansas anymore. But it is still a world in which all authority has been given to the One who still says: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you and I shall be with you till the end of the world, even when the ends of the earth come to you!”

Welcoming the Stranger¹

Justo L. González

Independent Scholar

Abstract

Este artículo se escribió en preparación para una conferencia sobre el tema “Dándole la bienvenida al extranjero”. El tema central es que tenemos que empezar por redefinir qué es eso de “el extranjero”. En la Iglesia, todos somos en cierto modo extranjeros, puesto que la Iglesia no nos pertenece, sino que es de Jesucristo. Para verdaderamente darle la bienvenida al extranjero, tenemos que comenzar por reconocer que nosotros mismos somos extranjeros y extranjeras. De otro modo, nuestra bienvenida parece ser una acción de benevolencia por parte nuestra, cuando en realidad se trata sencillamente de que todos nosotros y nosotras, como personas extranjeras, somos compañeros de camino con esa otra persona a quienes llamamos extranjera. Además, tenemos que reconocer que el ser extranjero es una relación recíproca, puesto que si una persona nos parece extranjera, nosotros también somos extranjeros para ella.

Keywords: *church diversity, reciprocal difference, cultural language, idiomatic expressions*

At the opening of this meeting we were discussing who is the stranger. Now I would like to revisit that term, but from a different angle. To begin with, we must understand that there is no such thing as a stranger. Even though the image that we often have of a stranger is one of loneliness, and that certainly is the painful experience of many in a strange land, you cannot be a stranger by yourself. If Pedro is a stranger to Peter, it is because Peter is also a stranger to Pedro. If Maria is a stranger to Mary, it is because Mary is also a stranger to Maria. Peter may think that Pedro is lonely because he does not have others around him who understand and support him. And that is probably true. But Pedro is lonely also because he does not understand Peter -because Peter, who may be his employer or his boss, appears inscrutable to Pedro.

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This means that one important step in really being able to welcome and to understand the stranger is to try to discover what in us and in our way of doing things and of looking at things is strange to that stranger whom we wish to welcome. This doesn't mean that we necessarily have to change, to abandon all elements in our culture and our traditions that may seem strange to the stranger. But it does mean that we must understand why they do seem strange to others.

Allow me to illustrate this with an experience I had some years ago. I was visiting a church whose traditional, English-speaking congregation had decided that they would share their facilities with another congregation of immigrants from El Salvador. In a conversation with the Anglo-American pastor, he told me that the Salvadoran congregation was very nice and friendly, that they had a shared meal and a shared service every month, and that it was all very inspiring to both. But there was a problem: The members of his congregation were complaining that when the Salvadorans used the bathrooms they would leave the soiled paper lying in a corner of the stall. He did not know how to approach the subject without being offensive, and he was hoping I would speak to the other congregation about that. Now, if you have traveled in Central America you have seen signs wherever tourists or other foreigners might be visiting: "The water pressure is very low. Paper will clog the toilets. Please deposit your paper in the basket." With a silent chuckle, I told the pastor that all he had to do was provide baskets in the stalls, or put up a sign in both English and Spanish indicating that it was appropriate to place the paper in the toilet bowl!

But that is only half of the story. That evening I was having dinner with the Salvadoran pastor at the home of some of his parishioners. At the head of the table sat an elderly man, obviously uneducated, but with the

poise and demeanor of an old-style gentleman. When the conversation turned to their congregation and their relationship with the other congregation, this man said: "You know, those people are tremendous. They let us use their building. They are very nice to our children, who sometimes are quite boisterous. They try to talk to us. But some of their customs are filthy. Would you believe that there are no baskets by their toilets?"

Who was the stranger? Obviously, from the point of view of understanding the facilities available and how they work, the Salvadorans were strangers, and they needed to learn from their English-speaking brothers and sisters. Indeed, this congregation was doing more than most by way of welcoming the stranger. The Salvadorans saw that, and they appreciated it. But still, from the point of view of the Salvadorans, there was something of a stranger in this other congregation.

If Maria is a stranger to Mary, Mary is a stranger to Maria. If Pedro is a stranger to Peter, Peter is a stranger to Pedro. Maria and Pedro can only be strangers to Peter and Mary inasmuch as Mary and Peter are strangers to Pedro and Maria. If Mary and Peter want to welcome the strangers Pedro and Maria, they must try to understand in what ways they themselves look strange to Pedro and Maria.

But then, there is a clear difference between Peter and Mary on the one hand and Maria and Pedro on the other. The strangeness that Pedro and Maria perceive in Peter and Mary is hidden because it is shared by most others around Mary and Peter. Most people around Peter speak Peter's language, and therefore Peter is seldom reminded that his is one of many possible ways of approaching life and doing things.

Mary does not see how strange her language is: A language where c-o-u-g-h does not rhyme with b-o-u-g-h, and neither of the two rhymes

with t-h-o-u-g-h. But Maria scratches his head trying to figure out that one is cough, another is bough, and the third is though. And Pedro has a hard time understanding why “What can I do for you?” is good, but “What can I do you for?” is not.

Peter finds it strange that Pedro will not pronounce the letter aitch. But he would not find it so strange if he were to ask Pedro, who would simply respond, “I honestly (jonestly) don’t know, your honor (jonor).”

Peter and Mary value their families -their spouses and their children. If you ask them how many there are in their family, they will say, “four,” or perhaps “five.” They think it is very important that they have a home of their own, where they can enjoy their privacy, and leave aside the hustle and bustle of the rest of life.

Maria and Pedro also value their families. But includes their spouses, children, her parents, his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second and third cousins, and even relatives by baptism -the comadres and compadres. Back home, if Peter had asked him how many were in his family, Pedro might have replied, “I really don’t know. I have a wife and two children, two sisters and a brother, seven nieces and five nephews, two aunts, one uncle, my in-laws, and many more.” Now learning to live in the US, he may well respond in terms of how many live with him: “My wife and two children, and her brother with two daughters.”

Maria and Pedro would have been baffled by all Peter’s and Mary’s talk of privacy. They probably will not even have thought about it, but the fact is that in Spanish there was no word for “privacy” as a value, until contacts with other cultures -particularly with North America- led to the invention of two possible translations, “privacidad” and “privacia”. Even to this day, the official Spanish language, does not include such a word. There is the word “privación,” but this does not mean privacy, but

rather deprivation. There is a word for “private”, privado. But this word means both “private” and “deprived.” To be “privado” can mean either to be private or to be deprived. If you have a hunting preserved, this is a “campo privado.” If you are imprisoned and deprived of freedom, you are “privado de libertad.” And there is a sense of a connection between these two, so that if you are very “privado” you are both very private and very deprived -deprived of fellowship, of human contact.

In the background and perspective of Peter and Mary, the best times are spent at home, behind closed doors and in the intimacy of his nuclear family. In the background and perspective of Maria and Pedro, the best times are spent on the sidewalk or the park, talking and sharing with whoever passes by, or in a large family gathering with parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and all the rest.

I could go on with many more examples -about the meaning of time and punctuality, about the manner conversations are conducted, about meals and celebrations, and many other similar subjects. But the point is that if Peter and Mary really do welcome Maria and Pedro, they will soon come to realize their own strangeness to Maria and Pedro.

This is one important reason why welcoming the stranger is difficult. It ultimately requires that we look at ourselves as strangers; that we ask questions such as, Why do we do things this particular way? Why do I see things this particular way? Why do we respond to certain situations in a particular way?

Notice the word “particular” in each one of those questions. When we ask those questions, we are setting aside one of the most cherished assurances of any dominant culture: our way of thinking, our understanding of reality, our response to various situations, are not normative. They are not universal. They are particular. They are one

option among many others. They may be better suited to the conditions in which we live. They may even be better in a higher sense. But this cannot be taken for granted. If we are to welcome the stranger, and this implies acknowledging our own strangeness, it also implies the possibility that other ways of seeing the world, other ways of doing things, other ways of reacting to various circumstances may make just as much sense as ours do.

This can be scary. We thought we were being good and kind in receiving this stranger. And now it turns out that, perhaps even without being aware of it, the stranger is challenging us; the stranger is turning us into strangers!

This may well be the underlying and often unrecognized cause of so much fear of the stranger. Quite often I hear comments such as “they will take our jobs,” or “they will overwhelm our social services,” or “they are illegal.” But what I actually hear behind all those comments is “they scare us.” “They will question our way of being human.” And, “God forbid, they might even force us to question what it means to be American!”

Even though I don’t like such feelings, I must acknowledge their validity. Indeed, the stranger -any stranger- is a challenge to us and a question mark on our own culture and traditions.

This we must acknowledge, because to offer a welcome to strangers without also welcoming the questions and challenges that they bring to us is not really to welcome them. It is to invite them to come live among us, but not mess up our lives; to accommodate themselves to our way of being, while we remain unchanged; to give up who they are in order to become one of us.

All of this is true of the church as well as of society at large. And

in the church, as in society at large, there are many reasons, and many levels of reasons, for welcoming the stranger.

In society at large we see publicity and marketing companies targeting immigrants, not because they are particularly concerned about their situation, but because they realize this is a growing market which they need. This is not wrong, for after all the task of such companies is to advertise and to sell. Likewise, in the church, there is the realization that the demographics of the nation are not what they used to be, and that churches must respond to the emerging situation simply to survive. This is not entirely wrong. After all, if the church is the bride of Christ we must love it, and we must seek its well-being. But it is not enough, for it turns the stranger into a means for an end.

Then, there are in the church those who would say that we have been commanded to welcome the stranger, and that we have been commanded to preach the gospel, so that in welcoming strangers and preaching the gospel to them we are obeying the commandment of God. This too is not entirely wrong. We certainly must welcome the stranger, and we certainly must preach the gospel. But even this is not enough, for it turns our welcoming and our witnessing into a matter of law, leading to a strange situation in which we preach the gospel because the law tells us to do it. I can well imagine what Luther would have said about that!

Then, as we saw this morning, we can welcome the stranger in recognition and celebration that we too -even those of us whose ancestors have been in the church for generations and generations- we too are strangers who have been welcomed by the one who made himself a stranger in order to be one of us. Now we are turning to the gospel! Now welcoming is not a matter of calculation nor even a matter of obedience, but a matter of acknowledging and celebrating that we are all

strangers, that all of us, who were not a people, are God's people; that we too, who were once far off, have been brought near. This is the gospel!

But there is more, for the gospel is also promise. Because the gospel is promise, we are to look at all things in the light of the promise of God. Because the gospel is promise, we are called to live as those who truly await its fulfilment. Because the gospel is promise, I wonder what would happen if we in the church came to see the emerging demographics, not just as a challenge, nor even as an opportunity for evangelism, but as God's mighty work allowing us a glimpse of that glorious promise: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" singing praises to our God, and to the Lamb who sits on the throne.

To them be praise for evermore! Amen!

